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## **EXPLORING TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES IN NORTHERN AL-BATINAH REGION: A SWOT ANALYSIS APPROACH**

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**Abstract:** The Sultanate of Oman stands as a prominent and enticing destination for tourists, offering a range of unique attractions. With its temperate climate year-round, varying by region, it provides visitors with a distinct advantage that sets it apart from neighboring areas. The commitment to fostering tourism and providing essential services to both tourists and residents is unwavering, with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, taking a leading role in shaping strategies and initiatives to bolster tourism development both within and outside the Sultanate. Oman, deeply steeped in history and boasting one of the most ancient legacies in the region, draws from this cultural wealth to drive its tourism sector. Taking inspiration from national and international models, Oman is determined to leverage its historical heritage by preserving and activating historical sites, not only as a source of national revenue but also as an engine of economic support for the local community and its inhabitants. In this endeavor, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has been instrumental in preparing and revitalizing numerous heritage and archaeological sites across the Sultanate, each of which serves as a living testament to Oman's rich history and the preservation of its cultural, political, and social values.

**Keywords:** Oman Tourism, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Archaeological Sites  
Tourism Development.

### **1. Introduction**

The Sultanate of Oman enjoys several tourist potentials, which makes it among the most attractive countries for tourism. It enjoys a moderate climate throughout the year which varies according to the location of the region. A tourist finds this feature and this diversity advantage which makes the country exceptionally different from its neighbouring regions. The government and civil society organizations are continuously interested in promoting tourism and providing the necessary services to visitors and residents of the Sultanate. Among these institutions that play a broad and tangible role is the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the official sponsor of tourism, and the decision-maker of strategies and programs that support and promote tourism development inside and outside the Sultanate.

The Sultanate of Oman is one of the oldest countries in the region with a deep-rooted history, bearing in mind that the ancients have left a cultural legacy that gives Oman today an outlook for tourism. The Sultanate, simulating Arab and international experiences, strives for seizing these characteristics by preserving its history and activating it through using historical sites as a source of national income and a source of economic support for the community and its citizens. Therefore, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has played a major role in

## Original Article

preparing and enabling many heritage and archaeological sites in the Sultanate for tourism. These sites speak the history of Oman and ultimately preserve its cultural, political and social values.

In every region of the Sultanate, people can see evidence of the Ministry's role in preserving the heritage, which makes Omani people proud as it is considered a treasure for future generations. It is perceived as a gift from grandparents to children. Among these roles played by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in cooperation with other ministries, is to preserve the cultural heritage and the oral history and make it an inspiration for generations and a source of knowledge, history and culture. Consequently, as the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation takes pride in this heritage, it has adopted a national strategy for preserving the Omani heritage. This happens in the means of encouraging scientific research in topics related to the cultural history of the Sultanate. Therefore, this study is one of the outcomes of this strategy as well as an outcome of the effort that the Ministry has taken in partnership with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Information. This study will mainly focus on the myths associated with the three main historical places in the Governorate of Northern Al-Batinah and will evaluate factors namely, the view of the place, general description of the place, demographic data, infrastructure settings, and economic factors using SWOT analysis. It is widely known that a myth of a place can add value to the place and if it is taken into account when developing a particular place, it can attract tourists and reinvigorate the place.

### 2. Literature Review and Study Background:

In many countries across the globe, tourism offers development opportunities that enhance employability and bring economic benefits to the local people (Saarinen et al., 2009). For tourism to be successful, there must be a promotion of sustainable development to enable local inhabitants and service providers to raise the standards in the tourist attractions (Barkin, 1996). One of the most important sustainable elements which add value to tourism in a particular place is cultural tourism, which contributes to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the place (Kaufmane et al., 2007). This study highly considers the myths of three places in the governorate of Northern AlBatinah in the Sultanate of Oman. The background of the places and their associated myths are illustrated below:

#### 2.1. First location: HouraBargha, Sohar

*Houra al-Bunyan* (or *Hura al-Kafir* as the owners of the area call it) is a relatively large mountain located in the state of Sohar on the road to *Wadi al-Jazi* (See Figure 1). The road to it is from *Falaj Al-Qaba'yel* roundabout towards Al-Buraimi, with around fifteen kilometres driving distance. It is located directly on the southern side of the *Wadi Al-Jazi* dam. This location is easy to reach and it does not require any climbing equipment.

The reason behind this name, as the narrators proclaim, is a mountain that was inhabited by the Persians (others claim it was the Portuguese) who invaded Oman in ancient times. Based on the fact that the people of Oman were Muslims, they called a non-Muslim an infidel or *Kafir* in Arabic. Since this mountain was a military site for the leaders of the Persians (or Portuguese) occupiers, this place was called *Houra al-Kafir*. As for the name *Houra Al-Bunyan*, it came after the former name, *Houra Al-Bunyan* because people living in this area today changed the first name with the second, for appropriacy purposes, stipulated by the Omani customs and morals of respect.

Among the folktales narrated around this mountain is the cause of the name. One of the narrators states the reason for naming *Houra Al-Bunyan* as *Hura al-Kafir* is that it is about the infidel (*al-kafir*) who used to live there and built a fortress, which still exists today. There are also other mountains in nearby areas that are called *AlHoura* too, such as *HouraBerga*, *Houra Al-Arsh*, *Houra Al-Kallab*, and other poplars that have their names by the owners of the place.

Among the tales around this place is the story of *Houra Al-Bunyan* and the tunnel. The story is extraordinary and mysterious. According to the locals, there were multiple stories about the same place which goes back to the time of the *khalifa* (prophet successor) Ali bin Abi Talib (may God exalt his face). They dug a tunnel linking *Houra Al-Bunyan* to the castle of Sohar. Another story is about the daughter of the king of Persia and her sharp sight.

## Original Article

She could see the enemy from a distance of several days, which made it easier for her people to prepare to meet the enemy and to attack them before they arrive. This girl, according to different narratives, was sharp-eyed as she could see tens and hundreds of kilometres away.

There is also the story of the Persians and the leader Ali bin Abi Talib (may God exalt his face). It is an awkward legend about the *Imam* (leader) Ali bin Abi Talib when he challenged these people who were occupying *Houra*, preventing every passerby from passing through, and taking tax from them.

### 2.2. The Second Location

The *Almashwa* Tree, Liwa

A tree is located in the *Al-Zahimi* area, which is approximately forty kilometres away from the centre of the state (See Figure 2). It can be reached through the village of *Fazah* using four-wheel-drive vehicles. The road is mostly paved now, but around fifteen kilometres are still unpaved. The tree is located on the western side of the centre of Liwa, passing through the village of *Fazah*, in *Al-Rassa*, and then *Al-Zahimi*.

The *Almashwa* tree (as the owners of the area call it) is a giant rare tree that can hardly be found around Oman. Its scientific name is *baobu*, which is a tree commonly found in Africa. It was included in the Omani Encyclopedia as: "The *almashwa* tree is huge reaches a height of thirty meters and sheds its leaves annually. It has a wide shade and a legendary huge trunk that is over tens of meters. Additionally, it has oval-shaped fruits up to thirty centimetres long and covered by velvety hairs." It is found in lively and active places and is frequently visited by tourists in the four seasons.

The tales of this place are linked to the *Almashwa* tree, the gigantic tree that reaches a height of thirty meters. Its massive and legendary trunk reaches tens of meters, and its oval-shaped fruits resemble velvety perfume bottles. This place is linked to the legend of the magical treatment by the *Almashwa* tree (fixing and soothing toothache). This is done by inserting a nail, a pebble, a gunshot or an iron into the body of the tree. In addition, some locals say that the tree has unique healing properties in treating abdominal pain and skin diseases. Other people believe that they can be blessed with this tree. Believing in its healing power is a common idea. There is also the tomb of a righteous man whose name is Sheikh Muhammad (as the people believe) and he is the faithful guardian of this tree, so, he is the one to protect it if it was subjected to any sabotage. To sum up, locals have several anecdotes about other people who came to this tree and struck nails, iron and pebbles, and they benefited greatly.

### 2.3. The Third Location: Mashaiq Bani Kharus, Al-Suwaiq

"Mashaiq Fort" is located in the village of Mashaiq Bani Kharus in the state of Al-Suwaiq (See Figure 3). It was named after the village and it is one of the most famous ancient monuments in the state. This mountainous village is located a half distance between the village of *Bedaya* and *Khadra Bani Saad* roundabout. It is about 14 km from the main road to the west, and it has a paved road that connects the village to the castle. The castle is located on a high hill for security and defensive motives, for which people were building these castles. Around the castle, the houses of the people spread, but have become deserted because they moved to modern houses close to the castle. Yet, they still use some of the old facilities like the mosque. The castle contains several rooms between 15 and 40 rooms, as stated by the narrators. The village is attached to landmarks that still exist, such as the presence of some defensive places that they call *Siba* and *Booma* and used as defensive fortifications. In addition, there are four types of cemeteries, namely the cemetery of children, the adults, the foreigners and some of them call it the forty, and the cemetery of *Mujaddar*. Not far from the village, there is a high mountain called *Buhor* monument, which is used by remote residents and sea riders in some of their fishing means to help them see the village.

Among the legends that the people talk about is the legend of the *jinn*. The narrators had different narratives about the legends of the *jinn*. Some of them consider them to be a figment of imagination, and some prove them because they had experience with them.

## 3. Research Methodology:

## Original Article

This study utilizes SWOT analysis to evaluate the potential of developing the three historical places. Several studies have used SWOT analysis to rank the places for tourism development (see Ganjali 2014; Ghorbani et al. 2015; Mondal and Haque 2017). According to Krasavac et al. (2018), SWOT analysis is one of the efficient methods of evaluating various aspects of the system, regardless of its nature and complexity. Evaluating the strengths and the weaknesses of historical places in the context of tourism development as well as identifying the opportunities and the threats, allows us to identify the pros and cons of developing a particular location compared to others. In the SWOT analysis, we have identified twenty indicators using five dimensions to evaluate these three places, which are the myth associated with the place, the view of the place, general description of the place, demographic, and infrastructure services, and economic factors (See Table 3). In addition to the SWOT analysis, we have also collected data for the public services and infrastructure (see table 1), and demographic and economic data by state (see table 2), which are analyzed and illustrated below.

### 4. Research Analysis

#### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis:

Table 1 illustrates the distance between the three historical places and the location of the public service and other important infrastructure. The table shows that for Almashwa Tree, the ATM is the farthest service while the mosque is the nearest infrastructure to the place, with an overall average of 22.2 KM between the attraction and the other services and infrastructures is illustrated in Table 1. As far as the HouraBargha is concerned, Table 1 illustrates that health services (ambulance unit and polyclinic) are the farthest services to the place, while the mosque is the nearest infrastructure to the location, with an overall average of 13.1 KM between the place and the other services and infrastructures illustrated in Table 1. Table 1 also demonstrates that the nearest infrastructures are the mosque, electricity, and water lines to Mashaiq Bani Kharous, while polyclinic is the farthest service to the place, with a 10.9 km average distance between all the service and infrastructures and the location. Table 2 also illustrates the demographic information along with medium and small businesses in the *Wilayat* where these three historical places are located. Table 2 illustrates that *Wilayat Sohar* (where HouraBargha is located) has the largest number of populations with 232,849 individuals, while *Wilayat Liwa* (Where Almashwa Tree is located) has the least number of people with 55,698 people. *Wilayat Alswuaiq* (where Mashaiq Bani Kharous is located) has around 184,561.

Table 2 also shows that the total number of the smallest business is 1,340 with around 57%, 32% and 11% located in Sohar, Alswuaiq and Liwa respectively. Table 2 also shows that the total number of small businesses is 325 with 82%, 16% and 2% existing in Sohar, Alswuaiq and Liwa respectively. As long as the medium businesses are concerned, there are 20 medium businesses with 85%, 15% and 0% located in Sohar, Alswuaiq and Liwa respectively.

It is noted from the above analysis that, the services and infrastructures illustrated in Table 1 are close to Mashaiq Bani Kharous, HouraBargha and Almashwa Tree respectively. In addition, the information provided in table 2 highlights that *Wilayat Sohar* is the most suitable place in terms of population and small and medium businesses which are considered as the main factor that can help in activating the tourism place (e.g. HouraBargha).

<b>Table (1) (km):</b> The distance of tourist sites from public services and infrastructure			
State	Al-Suwaiq	Sohar	Liwa
Location name	Mashaiq Bani Kharus (km)	Houra Al-Bragha (km)	The Almashwa Tree (km)
Nearest police station	20.5	13.2	24.5
Nearest ambulance	20.5	23.9	31

## Original Article

Nearest mosque	0.1	1.7	0.2
Nearest hotel	20.4	17.1	32
Nearest ATM	12.7	17	33.6
Nearest health Centre	0.6	15.3	8.7
Nearest health complex	27.1	23.9	32.6
Nearest pharmacy	12.6	16.3	30
Nearest petrol station	12.7	15.5	29.6
Nearest shopping Centre	12.7	17.5	30
Nearest attraction site	12.6	11.5	30.4
Nearest paved road	0.03	3.2	20
Nearest electricity line	0.1	2.3	0.5
Nearest water supply	0.1	4.6	7.4
Average	10.9	13.1	22.2

All given data are taken from the National Center for Statistical Information

**Table (2): Statistics of demographic and economic data by state to which the site belongs**

State	Sohar Hawra Al-Bragha	Liwa The Mashow Tree	Al-Suwaiq Mashaig Bani Kharus
Number of total inhabitants	232849	55698	184561
Number of Omani inhabitants	131592	36327	136752
Number of Omani inhabitants	101257	19371	47809
The Smallest enterprises	770	147	423
Small enterprises	267	52	6
medium enterprises	17	3	0

\*All given data are taken from the National Center for Statistical Information

\*\* Data of the smallest, small and medium enterprises are taken from the Authority for SME development.

### 4. 2.SWOT Analysis:

Table 1 illustrates the dimensions and the associated indicators for the SWOT analysis adopted in this study. Each indicator is given a score that expresses the importance of the indicator in this study. The four elements of the SWOT analysis are explained for each location below.

#### 4.2.1. Houra Bargha:

**Strengths and weaknesses:** Table 4 illustrates several strengths of the place including the uniqueness of the story associated with the place, people's belief in the importance of the place, the wide surrounding area which will



## Original Article

enable the developers to improve attractive services and infrastructure around the place, and the public ownership of the place. On the other hand, there is only one weak point associated with the places which is the high cost of development.

**Opportunities and threats:** *Houra Bargha* has several opportunities for development as stated in Table 4 such as other close tourism attractions from the place, the location is close to Sohar airport and Sohar port, the existence of handicrafts surrounding the location, population density and location accessibility. On the other hand, the location has some threats including the distance between the place and the health services and the distance between the place the nearest asphalt road.

**1 Points of** 1. The rarity of the legend. 1.1 **strength** 2. The connection of the place and the legend with the history of Sohar and the ancient 1.2 Omani history, in addition to its connection with other legends.

3. The people's belief in the importance of the site as it tells something of the history of 1.3 armed conflicts in the region.

4. Evidence for the historical place and for the legend. 1.4

		5. The landmark is visible from distance so that it can be seen from the states of Saham and Liwa in addition to its view from places close to it.	2.1
		6. There are sufficient spaces for expansion to create services.	2.2
		7. The site tells the history of ancient Sohar, which provides an opportunity to set up a museum for the history of the region.	2.3
		8. It is located near the <i>Wadi al-Jazidam</i> .	2.4
		9. Public ownership of the place.	3.1
2	<b>Points of weakness</b>	1. The cost of enhancing and rehabilitating the place.	3.2
3	<b>Chances</b>	1. Suitable place for tourism on most days of the year.	3.3
		2. Proximity to some tourist places to ensure the design of an integrated tourism program.	3.4
		3. It is close to Sohar Industrial Port, Sohar Industrial Area and Sohar Free Zone.	3.4
		4. Close to Sohar Airport.	3.4
		5. It is close to some archaeological sites.	3.4
		6. Ease of access to the place.	3.6
		7. The presence of handicrafts in and around the site.	3.7
		8. Diversity of aspects of site development.	3.8
		9. The people's connection to the place.	3.9
		10. Population density surrounding the landmark.	4.1
		11. The proximity of the necessary services and infrastructure to the site, such as the mosque and power lines.	4.2
		12. Availability of small and medium enterprises in the region.	5.1
4	<b>Threats</b>	1. The presence of quarries near the site as they reached the place of <i>Al-Houra</i> .	3.5
		2. The large number of trucks loaded with rock crushers surrounding the place.	3.5
		3. There is no asphalted road to the place, at a distance of approximately 3 km.	4.2
		4. the long distance to the necessary services from the site, such as the health complex, ambulance unit and hotel facilities.	4.2

### 4.2.2. Almashwa Tree:

## Original Article

**Strengths and weaknesses:** Table 5 shows multiple strengths of Almashwa Tree including the uniqueness and the strengths of the story, the availability of good space around the tree, clean nature and public ownership of the place. On the other hand, there are some weaknesses of the location which is focusing on the need of the place for improvement and development.

**Opportunities and threats:** Table 5 also illustrates the opportunities and the weaknesses of the *Almashwa Tree*, which are 6 and 10 respectively. The opportunities include the good relationship between the local people and the place, the sustainability of the places due to the water, the moderate weather of the places in most times of the year. On the other hand, the threats are weighing the opportunities including the distance between the place and other tourism and economic places, lack of handicrafts around the place, lack of the local people surrounding the place, people immigration from the place, lack of SMEs and lack of common services.

**Table (5): SWOT analysis of the site of the Mashow Tree in the state of Liwa**

S.N		Description	Code
1	<b>Points of strength</b>	1. The rarity of the legend.	1.1
		2. The strength of the legend's connection to the place and its connection with other legends.	1.2
		3. The legend's fame in popular circles.	1.3
		4. The strength of the myth and the presence of clear evidence to support it.	1.4
		5. The tree is located around a group of farms in addition to Wadi AlZahimi.	2.1
		6. Existence of sufficient spaces around the tree for activities related to legend and tourism.	2.2
		7. The connection of the tree with the Omani beliefs in its healing powers from diseases.	2.3
		8. The place is characterized by a clean natural environment that creates a suitable place for relaxation.	2.4
		9. Public ownership of the place.	3.1
2	<b>Points of weakness</b>	1. The place needs rehabilitation and more development.	3.2
3	<b>Chances</b>	1. The presence of farms and valleys near the site of the tree, which enables the work of an integrated tourism program.	2.4
		2. Suitability of the place for tourism in most days of the year.	3.3
		3. The people's attachment to the place and the media's interest in the tree at a local level.	3.9
		4. Sustainability of the existence of the tree with the presence of water around it.	3.9
		5. The proximity of some services and infrastructure necessary for the site, such as the mosque, electricity lines and water network lines.	4.2

## Original Article

		6. Water is available as the <i>Falaj Daoudi</i> passes under the tree.	4.2
4	<b>Threats</b>	1. The place is far from tourist and economic places.	3.4
		2. The tree is located on the banks of Wadi Al-Zahimi, which is one of the largest valleys in the governorate.	3.5
		3. Its distance from the state center is approximately 40 km.	3.6
		4. Weak interest in handicrafts around the site.	3.7
		5. Limited aspects of diversification in the development of the site.	3.8
		6. The low population density in the state and around the site, which hinders the provision of human resources that operate and develop the place.	4.1
		7. The migration of the people from the region to the areas near the center of the state.	4.1
		8. Proximity of the necessary services and infrastructure from the village, such as the ATM machine, the health complex and the sites of touristic attractions.	4.2
		9. Lack of public services, including asphalt roads, as it is difficult to reach the place except by four-wheel drive vehicles.	4.2
		10. Unavailability of small and medium enterprises on the site.	5.1

### 4.2.3. Mashaiq Bani Kharous:

**Strengths and weaknesses:** Table 6 shows the SWOT analysis for Mashaiq Bani Kharous. The table illustrates seven strengths and only 3 weaknesses. The strengths include the association of the place with the character of Imam Salim Alkharousi, the existence of a water channel nearby the place, the existence of the pieces of evidence related to the story and the beautiful view of the place. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the places include the weakness of the story, the need for the place for major development and the weak belief about the story of the place.

**Opportunities and threats:** Table 6 also shows 8 opportunities and 5 weaknesses related to the place. The opportunities include the moderate weather surrounding the place in most times of the year, the easy access to the place from the main roads, the places are close to the sands which are considered as another attraction for the tourist, the place is close to the main services and infrastructures and the good relationship between the local people and the place. On the other hand, the place has some threats such as the lack of handicrafts, the lack of SMEs and the lack of the population.

Table (6): SWOT analysis of the site of Mashaiq Bani Kharus in the Wilayat of Al-Suwaïq			
S.N	Axles	Description	Code
1	<b>Points of strength</b>	1. The place's connection with other legends and the personality of <i>Imam</i> Salem bin Rashid Al Kharusi.	1.2
		2. The presence of clear evidence in the place that reflects the details of the legend	1.4
		3. The presence of a <i>Daoudi Falaj</i> that passes near the castle.	2.1
		4. The beautiful view of the place around it.	2.1



## Original Article

		5. The vast surroundings of the archaeological landmark.	2.2
		6. The site is a model of an old Omani village and its associated fortifications.	2.3
		7. Public ownership of the place.	3.1
2	<b>Points of</b>	1. Legend is not rare	1.1
	<b>weakness</b>	2. Weak belief around the myth and its effectiveness	1.3
		3. The site needs renovation and rehabilitation.	3.2
3		1. It is considered a suitable place for relaxation.	2.4
	<b>Chances</b>	2. The climate is moderate in most seasons of the year.	3.3
		3. Its proximity to the <i>Ramoul</i> area is a source of attraction for tourists.	3.4
		4. less sources of threats surrounding the site	3.5
		5. Ease of access to the place	3.6
		6. Diversity of aspects of tourism development of the site	3.8
		7. The people's connection with the old village and the castle through the continued use of some facilities such as the mosque and the Holy Qur'an memorization school, in addition to the government's policy in establishing housing schemes for the villagers near the site.	3.9
		8. The proximity of the necessary services and infrastructure to the castle, such as electricity lines, the water network, and the mosque	4.2
4	<b>Threats</b>	1. The lack of handicrafts in and around the site.	3.7
		2. Weak population density in the village.	4.1
		3. Site is far from services such as the health complex, ambulance units, the police station and hotel facilities.	4.2
		4. Poor services and unavailability of others.	4.2
		5. Lack of small and medium enterprises in the region.	5.1

## Conclusion

The Development of tourist places associated with myths can enhance the opportunities of attracting more tourists to the country. To maximize utilization and to gain maximum value, this study used SWOT analysis to evaluate three historically important attractions in the Governorate of Northern Al-Batinah in terms of their associated myths and other factors including the view of the place, general description of the place, demographic, and infrastructure settings, and the economic factors. The SWOT analysis shows that HouraBargha has great development potential compared to Almashwa Tree and Mashaiq Bani Kharous. HouraBargha has the greatest potential and the priority for development as the myth is stronger and if integrated into the place, it will attract the attention of external and internal tourists. In addition, Wilayat Sohar has more people and businesses compared to its counterpart locations. This is in line with Sariisik et al. (2011) who argue that population and SMEs are two important factors that should be considered when developing historical places. In addition, HouraBargha has a larger space surrounding the location which enables the developers to add more services and infrastructure which are needed by the visitors of the place. This is consistent with Corvo (2011) who argue that tourists are attracted more by places that have better infrastructure and are connected with nature and larger spaces so that they can play and enjoy the beauty and the fresh air. Moreover, the place is very close to Sohar airport, Sohar Industrial

## **Original Article**

Port, Sohar Industrial Area and Sohar Free Zone, which will enable for faster growth and easier movement of the tourists around the place.

We hope that the results of this research are to be adopted and used by the officials to develop the chosen place and that researchers can use the adopted methodology for future research. This research is useful for several stakeholders including NGOs, society and planners to be aware of the factors which should be considered for choosing the tourist places for development.

Besides the services and the infrastructures surrounding the places, the research highlights the importance of the myths associated with the places to be considered too when developing the historical places.

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### **Appendixes:**

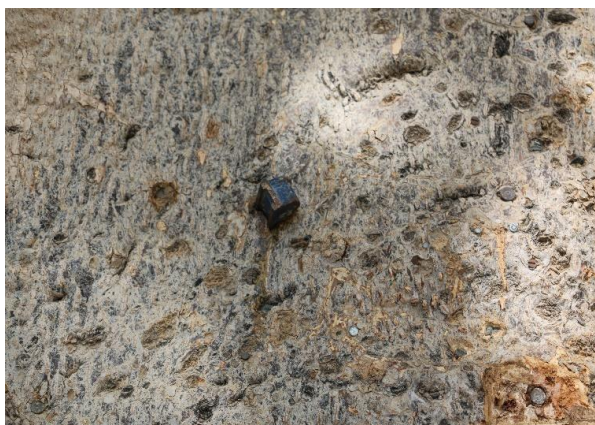
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*Figure 1. Houra Bargha, Sohar*



**Original Article**



*Figure 2. Almeshwa Tree, Liwa*



*Figure 3. Mashaiq Bani Kharous, Alsuwaiq*